

Sam Harris' Liberal Masquerade

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, MAY 22 2012

In a recent blog post on his website, neuroscientist and author Sam Harris comes out in defence of ethnic profiling.[1] Needless to say, Harris' article has certainly elicited a barrage of overwhelmingly negative criticism. Many have taken Harris to task for his position. P.Z. Myers, Chris Stedman and Josh Rosenau have intellectually chastised Harris' prescriptions on their ineffectiveness, affront to civil liberties, moral bankruptcy and leanings towards racism. Harris has responded by largely ignoring his critics' arguments, screaming 'political correctness gone mad' and pretending that he is in fact talking about behavioral profiling rather than ethnic profiling. To be fair, Harris has also invited security expert Bruce Schneier to post and "sort him out" on his blog. Although Schneier certainly did a good job refuting Harris, it is unclear whether Harris will admit he is wrong.

The broader significance of this defence from Harris is that it marks a continuation of his vindication of radical, illiberal, authoritarian, repressive and rabidly anti-Muslim political stances. Let us leave his ideas about the paranormal, reincarnation, Eastern Mysticism, the persecution of the Jews and attempts at philosophy for another day. Harris' politics are worthy of discussion because one of the strangest things about him is that, on many occasions, he has declared himself a liberal.[2] This proclamation seems difficult to take seriously because Harris' positions on Islam, Muslims, and foreign policy are clearly not liberal and very much to the outer realms of the political spectrum.[3] This latest defence of ethnic profiling makes Harris' views on this practice more extreme than George W. Bush and John Ashcroft as they have both condemned the practice in public. In all probability this condemnation is largely because racial and ethnic profiling is prohibited in the U.S. Constitution. Still, this is not the first time Harris has shown his dislike for the U.S. Constitution.

In *The Moral Landscape*, Harris envisions a future where technology, such as the utilisation of lie detectors in trials, will spawn a brave new world of perfect moral transparency. In this future, Harris sees legal scholars who might worry about the implications of this measure for the Fifth Amendment as being old-fashioned. Indeed, Harris presents his views about the Fifth Amendment very clearly:

"[t]he prohibition against compelled testimony itself appears to be a relic of a more superstitious age. It was once widely believed that lying under oath would damn a person's soul for eternity, and it was thought that no one, not even a murderer, should be placed between the rock of Justice and so hard a place as hell." (*The Moral Landscape* p 135)

Aside from being untrue, the prohibition about compelled testimony stems from the writings of the *Enlightenment* and the core rights defined in the Magna Carta, Harris doesn't feel that his position against the Fifth Amendment represents a potentially dangerous stepping stone to serious abuses of governmental power and injustices. Then again, perhaps the worrying thing is that he does.

Harris' Political Landscape

Whilst it is true that Harris has attacked other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, it seems that he reserves particular venom for Islam and Muslims and his political views mirror this. To be sure, Harris' critiques of other religions demonstrate a distinct lack of understanding on his part, but his attacks on Islam and Muslims often fall well beyond the walls of well-informed, rational understanding and morph into distinctly nativist polemics. Now, in these

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times there is certainly a need for insightful critiques of Islam, particularly the problematic way it is practiced in many parts of the world, and potentially feasible ideas about pathways to reformation and democratization in Islam need to be formulated. However, Harris offers little of what can be considered rational or constructive in his 'studies' on Islam.

Using intellectually lazy generalizations and over simplifications, Harris' arguments habitually involve gross exaggerations, rife with Manichean and sensationalist undertones, about how Western Civilization is under threat from Muslims. In the process, the conspiracy theorist, fear-mongering and anti-immigration sweat seeps out. Harris feels that his "fellow liberals" fail to understand "how dangerous and depraved our enemies in the Muslim world are" and that "Muslim immigrants show little inclination to acquire the secular and civil values of their host countries, and yet exploit these values to the utmost—demanding tolerance for their backwardness, their misogyny, their anti-Semitism, and the genocidal hatred that is regularly preached in their mosques". An advocate of the refuted Eurabia conspiracy theory, Harris has stated that "Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe. The demographic trends are ominous: Given current birthrates, France could be a majority Muslim country in 25 years, and that is if immigration were to stop tomorrow". This is truly delusional and one has to only observe that the French Muslim population is forecasted by the Pew Research Centre to grow to 10% by 2030 from its present figure of 7.5%, and France will be the Western European state with the highest number of Muslims. By modern standards, then, Harris seems to see Muslims through the same lens as the radical-right and far-right in western democracies. Indeed, Harris believes that liberals could learn something from the far-right about Muslims because "the people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists". Harris has often leaned very heavily towards advocating second class citizenship for Muslims. For example, Harris has stated that it is not possible "to be a good Muslim, to have military and economic power, and to not pose an unconscionable threat to the civil societies of others" (*The End of Faith*, p 150).

Like many who possess deeply irrational anti-Muslim sentiment, Harris believes that "There is no such thing as Islamophobia." Astonishingly, Harris even refused to change this position in the slightest after the atrocities committed by Breivik in Norway. In a piece entitled *Christian Terrorism and Islamophobia*, Harris offers his condolences concerning the attack and its victims, yet he concluded that the true tragedy of this atrocity is that Breivik, has made "the truth" even more difficult to speak about. Also, Harris seemed annoyed at the possibility that focus on security threats may divert away from Muslims. Indeed, "we are bound to hear a lot of deluded talk about the dangers of Islamophobia and about the need to address the threat of "terrorism" in purely generic terms," Harris writes. It would be interesting to see Harris tell the victims' families that there is no such thing as Islamophobia and that they would be deluded to think otherwise.

Treading similarly militant footsteps as his late colleague, Christopher Hitchens, Harris has offered his own insights into foreign policy and the war on terror. Harris declares, "We are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so" (*The End of Faith*, p 111-112). As excited by militarism as the late Hitch, Harris claims that "some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them" and that "We will continue to spill blood in what is, at bottom, a war of ideas" (*The End of Faith*, p 52-53).

Yet, even Hitchens would not go so far as to agree with Harris' defence of torture. Employing an exaggerated version of the oft-refuted ticking-time-bomb scenario, Harris has argued that there are extreme circumstances in which "practices like "water-boarding" may not only be ethically justifiable, but ethically necessary". The crux of Harris' 'moral' argument is that torture should be accepted as collateral damage in the 'war on Islam'. Say what you will about the morality of torture, this is a troubling position for a 'liberal' to say the least.

Echoing the sentiments of the most hardened right-wing nationalists in his analysis of the September 11 attacks and other accounts of suicide terrorism, Harris sees "adherence to Islam" as the key motivation for such attacks. He doesn't take into account the political reasoning behind such attacks and fails to even consider the concept of 'blowback', as described by the CIA and others, concerning the numerous, violent operations carried out by the U.S. in the Middle East and elsewhere, in order to ensure their continued hegemony over their 'areas of interest'. Instead, "The outrage that Muslims feel over U.S. and British foreign policy is primarily the product of *theological* concerns". Despite having no regional experience or expertise, Harris claims "Our own religious demagogues, the

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fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, will call a spade a spade and observe that there is a link between Islam and the kind of violence we see in the Muslim world. While I don't agree with these people on anything else, they are actually offering a much more candid and accurate diagnosis of the problem, vis-à-vis Islam, than anything that's coming from the Left"

Disinterested in political, economic, historical, geographical, psychological factors; and more empirically based academic studies, Harris simplistically proclaims that:

"If it were not for the religious doctrines of martyrdom and jihad, there would be no Al Qaeda; nor would there now be an influx of foreign fighters in Iraq. Nothing explains the behaviour of Muslim extremists better than what these men and women believe about God, paradise, and the moral imperative of defending the faith against infidels and apostates".

Harris cannot help but let his anti-Muslim position creep out in his analysis other aspects of Middle Eastern politics. Echoing hard right-wing Zionists, Harris has stated that Israel holds the "moral high ground" in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He says little, of course, about Israel's questionable activities and even believes that "it is only rational...for Israel to behave as though it is confronted by a cult of religious sociopaths".

Harris' belief in the moral justness of the neoconservative view of the Middle East can be discerned with his remarks that "it is telling that the people who speak with the greatest moral clarity about the current wars in the Middle East are members of the Christian right" and "Americans will come to believe that the only people hard-headed enough to fight the religious lunatics of the Muslim world are the religious lunatics of the West".

Interestingly, despite his criticism of Islam, particularly in the Middle East, and proclaimed sympathy for its victims, Harris has spilled little to no ink on the Arab Spring. This is somewhat odd as surely anyone who possessed genuine concern for the victims of the tyranny practiced by Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa would write gleefully about these protests and revolutions, yet Harris has said virtually nothing. It seems the reason Harris ignores the Arab Spring is because it countermines his imperialistic inclinations. In 'The End of Faith' (p 150), Harris states that America should impose secular dictators who will light the way to Islamic reformation. The depiction he paints of people in the developing world is that of foolish children who need the paternal hand of the U.S. to prop up 'benign dictators' to guide them because "We cannot wait for weapons of mass destruction to dribble out of the former Soviet Union-to pick only one horrible possibility-and into the hands of fanatics" (The End of Faith' p 150). Harris' remarks about weapons of mass destruction are worth further discussion because his views on this subject have produced opinions elsewhere which are not only highly detached from reality, but also dangerous:

It should be of particular concern to us that the beliefs of Muslims pose a special problem for nuclear deterrence. There is little possibility of our having a cold war with an Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons. A cold war requires that the parties be mutually deterred by the threat of death. Notions of martyrdom and jihad run roughshod over the logic that allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to pass half a century perched, more or less stably, on the brink of Armageddon. What will we do if an Islamist regime, which grows dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise, ever acquires long-range nuclear weaponry? If history is any guide, we will not be sure about where the offending warheads are or what their state of readiness is, and so we will be unable to rely on targeted, conventional weapons to destroy them. In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime—as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day—but it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe. How would such an unconscionable act of self-defense be perceived by the rest of the Muslim world? It would likely be seen as the first incursion of a genocidal crusade. The horrible irony here is that seeing could make it so: this very perception could plunge us into a state of hot war with any Muslim state that had the capacity to pose a nuclear threat of its own. All of this is perfectly insane, of course: I have just described a plausible scenario in which much of the world's population could be annihilated on account of religious ideas that belong on the same shelf with Batman, the philosopher's stone, and unicorns. That it would be a horrible absurdity for so many of us to die for the sake of myth does not mean, however, that it could not happen. Indeed, given the immunity to all reasonable intrusions that faith enjoys in our discourse, a catastrophe of this sort seems increasingly likely. We must come to terms with the

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possibility that men who are every bit as zealous to die as the nineteen hijackers may one day get their hands on long-range nuclear weaponry. The Muslim world in particular must anticipate this possibility and find some way to prevent it. Given the steady proliferation of technology, it is safe to say that time is not on our side. (The End of Faith pp. 128-129)

It really makes you worry. Doesn't it?

From Harris' vantage, if say Iran obtained a nuclear weapon, a pre-emptive nuclear first strike on the nation may be the only option available to the West, because Iran is an irrational actor with deluded ideas about paradise that cannot be reasoned with or engaged in diplomacy. It would be less surprising to hear this kind of rhetoric about nuclear holocausts coming from extreme religious preachers, a hawkish character in a Tom Clancy novel or the most deluded of fanatical ideologues, not someone who is frequently invited to speak about rationality, science and morality at leading universities and scientific conferences.

From the Margins to the Mainstream

Thankfully, despite Harris carrying influence and selling many books, he does not possess political power, not for now at least. Worryingly, though, Harris' extreme line of thinking on Muslims seems to have penetrated into the minds of people who potentially could hold the power. It has recently emerged that the U.S. military taught its potential future leaders that a "total war" against the world's 1.4 billion Muslims would be necessary to protect America from Islamic terrorists. Among the options considered for that conflict: using the lessons of "Hiroshima" to wipe out whole cities at once, targeting the "civilian population wherever necessary". Harris must have secretly loved this, although he may have been disappointed when this teaching was condemned by the Pentagon. Then again, Harris will probably feel that they are just being "politically correct", one of his favourite accusations, for not wishing to nuke Muslims to kingdom come.

Overall, when you consider Harris' disdain for human rights (well, those of Muslims anyway), identification and dehumanisation of enemies/scapegoats as a unifying cause, avid militarism, expansionist imperialism and obsession with national security, it becomes difficult to see him as a liberal. Instead, Harris' politics represent radical authoritarianism, nativism and militant imperialism surreptitiously masquerading as progressive liberalism and rationality. These political positions have been glossed unconvincingly by a veneer of academic respectability. Seeing as Harris allegedly values intellectual honesty, it might be hoped that he could at least come clean about his political views and stop the façade of being a liberal.

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[1] The part of the blog post which draws the most controversy is here:

"We should profile Muslims, or anyone who **looks** like he or she could conceivably be Muslim, and we should be honest about it. And, again, I wouldn't put someone who **looks** like me entirely outside the bull's-eye (after all, what would Adam Gadahn look like if he cleaned himself up?) But there are people who do not stand a chance of being jihadists, and TSA screeners can know this at a **glance**."

Words have been placed in bold to illustrate that Harris, in his initial post on the subject, has not defended behavioral profiling, but rather profiling based on appearance. Also, for those who believe Harris is not defending profiling based on ethnicity, it is important to recall his previous remarks in 2005:

"It is not enough for moderate Muslims to say "not in our name." They must now police their own communities. They

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must offer unreserved assistance to western governments in locating the extremists in their midst. They must tolerate, advocate, and even practice **ethnic profiling**."

[2] There are some areas which Harris displays more liberal positions on, such as his views on the legalization of drugs and taxation. The latter is more centre-left. These areas appear to be where Harris liberal views remain confined.

[3] Robert Wright has written about the New Atheists' views on foreign policy and Jeff Sparrow has recently produced pieces about the political leanings of the New Atheism movement. However, Chris Hedges has produced probably the most aggressive attacks.

About the author:

Alasdair McKay is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth. He has edited several books for E-International Relations, including *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).